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Misconceptions: Loss and melancholia in poetry of miscarriage, stillbirth and abortion

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**Misconceptions:
Loss and Melancholia in Poetry of Miscarriage, Stillbirth
and Abortion.**

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Bachelor of Arts Honours

Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences.

27th February 2006

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that cultural and discursive attitudes towards miscarriage, stillbirth and abortion attribute maternal blame to these losses and silence the expression of grief over them. It further argues that, following pregnancy loss, this silence and blame, coupled with the veneration and discursive production of motherhood as a woman's biological and psychical destiny, produce 'symptoms' that, according to Freud, are a sign of a pathological melancholia. I suggest, however, that these symptoms - self-reproach and impoverishment of the ego as responses to pregnancy loss, do not necessarily indicate a woman's pathological failure to resolve loss but reflect the social context in which pregnancy loss occurs and the discursive production of miscarriage, stillbirth, abortion and motherhood.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- (ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or
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I

Introduction

Sue Gillett (1998, n.p.) has written that “in our technologically advanced society where infant survival is the expectation and the norm, the mother who fails to deliver a living child is an anomaly, even a threat to the coherence of our social and symbolic orders”. She asks “Where is [this mother] in relation to life? What does she do to language, to meaning, to thought?” Rather than offer a response, I would like to appropriate her questions and ask, instead, How do our social and symbolic orders threaten *her*? What do language, meaning, thought do to *her*? Indeed, how does discourse contribute to this mother’s grief at the loss of a child, induce ego losses and affect her conception of self after the specific losses of miscarriage, stillbirth and abortion?

Freud argues in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917/1984, p. 252), that these two conditions are “regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal and so on”. For Freud, both are characterised by “a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, [and] inhibition of all activity” (1917/1984, p.252). He distinguishes melancholia from mourning, however, in stating that the former manifests in the individual as:

an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale. In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself. The patient represents his ego to us as

worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable;
he reproaches himself and expects to be cast out and punished
(1917/1984, p. 254).

Freud accounts for this disturbance of self-regard by arguing that the patient's self-accusations are really "reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it in to the patient's own ego" (1917/1984, pp. 257-258). He elaborates this point by explaining that, under 'normal' circumstances "a *real slight or disappointment*" from the loved person shatters the object-relationship with that person and, as a consequence, the libido is withdrawn from the object of love and invested in a new object. The melancholic's libido, however, does not invest in a new object, withdrawing, instead, into the melancholic's own ego. This withdrawal of the libido into the ego then serves "to establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object", wherein the ego can now be judged and reproached "by a special agency" (a point I shall return to) as if it were the lost object. He concludes that the result of this abnormal withdrawal of the libido into the ego is the transformation of an object-loss into an ego-loss.

Theorists such as Judith Butler have, however, pointed to Freud's later revision of his theories of melancholia. She remarks that in "Mourning and Melancholia", Freud's standpoint is that the resolution of grief is achieved by breaking the attachment, or cathexis, to the lost object and by the formation of other attachments to new objects. She points out, however, that later, in "The Ego and The Id", Freud "makes room for the notion that melancholic identification may be a *prerequisite* for letting the object go" and that these melancholic identifications thus come to constitute the ego itself (Butler, 1997/2004, p. 246).

This reformulation of “melancholia [as] a precondition for both the [formation of the] ego and the work of mourning” (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003, p. 4) calls into question Freud’s earlier assertion that impoverishment of the ego and self-reproach after loss are symptomatic of the melancholic’s “pathological disposition” (Freud, 1917/1984, p. 252). It would seem that this impoverishment of the ego and loss of self-regard must be aetiological, rather than symptomatic features of mourning itself. That is, any loss firstly precipitates a change in one’s conception of self and a redefinition of the self in relation to the world, and that this, in turn, results in a mourning for a lost self alongside, but distinguishable from, mourning for any object loss, ideal loss and so on. As Kristeva (1989, p. 5) puts it “any loss entails the loss of my being”.

Freud himself gestured toward this notion of the loss of self in “Mourning and Melancholia” in asking “whether a loss in the ego irrespective of the object – a purely narcissistic blow to the ego – may not suffice to produce the picture of melancholia” (Freud, 1917/1984, p. 262). He does not, however, explore this supposition further. To do so throws into doubt his assertions that the symptoms of melancholia, self-reproach and an impoverished ego, reflect a grief that has slipped into pathology. Instead, his question opens the way to understand these symptoms as not simply abnormal responses to the loss of a loved object, but as responses to a “narcissistic blow”, a wound to the ego that has resulted from something other than an ongoing attachment to, and incorporation of, the lost object.

In "Mourning and Melancholia" Freud (1917/1984, p. 260) argues that the ego incorporates the lost object as a narcissistic identification with it in order to deny that loss, and that the self-abasement of the ego is really directed against that lost object. He further asserts that this occurs when "one part of the ego sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, takes it as its object" (Freud, 1917/1984, p. 256). He deems this critical part of the ego "the agency commonly called 'conscience'" (Freud, 1917/1984, p. 256). This form of agency makes its appearance too, in his "On Narcissism" (1913/1999), where he surmises that this agency, or conscience, constantly watches the ego to ensure that the ego measures up to the demands of the ego-ideal. According to Freud (1913/1999, pp. 151-153), the formation of the ego-ideal comes about when the developing subject's infantile narcissism, or self-love, comes into conflict with the "cultural and ethical ideas" and the standards set by his parents and his or her society. In order to conform to these ideas, the subject must give up this self-love, substituting it with the ego-ideal which now becomes "the target of the self-love which was enjoyed in childhood by the actual ego". The implication here is that, through those parental and societal criticisms that inscribe certain cultural and ethical ideas, the infantile ego finds itself to be lacking and substitutes the ideal ego as its object of love. This formulation of the ego-ideal as an object of love that is already incorporated within the self, that embodies a set of standards with which the self strives to fulfil and identify, raises certain questions in regard to Freud's discussion of mourning and melancholia. If the ego-ideal can be an object of love, as Freud suggests, what happens when one fails to

meet its standards? Can this ideal be lost to the self and, if so, might this loss be an example of a “purely narcissistic blow”?

In commenting on Freud’s work on narcissism and the formation of the ego, Kristeva (1983/1989, p. 252) argues that:

The subject only exists inasmuch as it identifies with an ideal other who is the speaking other . . . a symbolic formation beyond the mirror [Lacan’s mirror of self-recognition], who is indeed the size of a Master, is a magnet for identification because he is neither an object of need nor one of desire. The Ego Ideal includes the Ego on account of the love that this Ego has for it and thus unifies it, restrains its drives, turns it into a Subject.

Here, Kristeva, like Freud, stresses that the ego strives to identify with the ego-ideal, but she goes further in suggesting that entry into the symbolic order and the attainment of subjectivity *depends* on the identification with this ideal. By implication then, a failure to successfully identify with this ideal leads to the inability to attain, or the loss of, subjectivity.

Similarly, in her work on gender acquisition, Judith Butler addresses the notion that identification with an ideal is imperative to the subject’s entry into the symbolic order. She asks, “Is there a way in which *gender* identifications or, rather the identifications that become central to the formation of gender, are reproduced through melancholic identification?” (1997/2004, p. 247). This question is crucial to my work here, as Butler extends the notion of melancholic identification as imperative in the attainment of subjectivity to emphasise its importance in the attainment of, and identification with, normative gender attributes and roles. Butler understands

‘melancholic identification’ as an effect of the child’s acquisition of gendered identity as propounded by Freudian theory. She writes:

the positions of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, which Freud . . . understood as the effects of laborious and uncertain accomplishment, are established in part through prohibitions which *demand the loss* of certain sexual attachments . . . the little girl becomes a girl through being subject to a prohibition which bars the mother as an object of desire and installs that barred object as part of the ego, indeed, as a melancholic identification (Butler, 1997/2004, pp. 247-248).

Here, Butler asserts that the prohibitions against incestuous and homosexual desire force the little girl to relinquish her mother as an object of desire and that object is, in turn, incorporated into the ego as a melancholic identification with her. In this way the mother as incorporated object becomes the girl’s first identification.

Identification, however, is not finalised here, with the little girl’s loss of the mother as object of desire and subsequent identification with her. And whether one does, or does not, ascribe to the psychoanalytic view that the initial entry into the symbolic is attained by the relinquishment of jouissance and incestuous and homosexual desire, the force of symbolic law can only be effective, can only sustain itself, through a *continued* reiteration of socially acceptable identifications and gendered subject positions that include, but extend beyond, one’s sexual orientation. As Butler (1993, p. 105) notes “identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted”.

Symbolic law, however, does not enforce certain normative subject positions by reiteration alone. Butler (1993, p. 100) suggests that:

certain identifications and affiliations are made, certain sympathetic connections amplified, precisely in order to institute

a *disidentification* with a position that seems to be saturated with injury or aggression [or punishment], one that might, as a consequence be occupiable only through imagining the loss of viable identity all together.

The acquisition, then, of identity, of subjectivity requires not only an acquiescence to the continued enforcement of normative, gendered identifications, but also the loss of alternate possibilities under the threat of the loss of identity within the symbolic altogether. In this way, Butler (1993, pp. 14-15) writes, the symbolic should be thought of as “a series of normatizing injunctions that secure the borders of sex through the threat of psychosis, abjection, psychic unlivability” In other words, confronted with the *threat* of “psychosis, abjection, psychic unlivability”, the individual strives to identify with a gendered ideal, an idealised sense of self, in order to retain a culturally sanctioned identity within the symbolic and to avoid taking up an abject subject position.

Here, Butler is primarily (but not exclusively) concerned with the idealisation of heterosexuality, and thus the abjection of non-heterosexual subject positions. Her analyses, however, of the dynamics involved in the symbolic order's hold on power, can be brought to bear on other social formations which fix the boundaries of normative gendered subject positions. For women, the attainment and maintenance of an always tenuous identification with an ego-ideal involves a complex and on-going engagement with those ideal identifications sanctioned by the symbolic as correct or proper enactments of femininity, and thus the abjection, the disidentification with others.

Butler, in fact, specifically uses the institutionalisation of motherhood to illustrate “the anguish and terror” (1987/2004, p. 27) that stepping outside the boundaries of discursively prescribed gender norms generates. She argues that discourse creates the illusion that, for women, motherhood is instinctually and biologically, rather than socially, prescribed. This cultural and discursive prescription deems the woman who is unable, or does not wish to become a mother as somehow faulty and denies her the right to “assume adult womanhood to the full, to prove [herself], to be ‘like other women’ (Rich (1976/1986 p. 25).

Kristeva (1977/1989, p. 161) argues further that motherhood is not only socially prescribed, but both religiously and secularly *consecrated*. Similarly, Adrienne Rich (1976/1986, p. 34) cites a strict demarcation set up in “patriarchal mythology, dream-symbolism, theology [and] language” where two ideas operate “side by side”. On the one hand the “female body is impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contamination, ‘the devil’s gateway.’ On the other hand, as mother the woman is beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing”. This binary that polarises women as either “good or evil, fertile or barren, pure or impure” (Rich, 1986, p. 34) creates both a set of ideal identifications towards which women strive and the spectre of abjection, the risk of losing one’s identification with an ideal (and consecrated) femininity. To fail to accomplish this ideal, through the experiences of miscarriage, stillbirth or abortion, calls into question a woman’s right to claim a culturally legitimate feminine subject position, and so deals her, I would argue, Freud’s ‘narcissistic blow’. That is, a loss in

her ego in her failure to identify with a constructed ego-ideal; a loss that does not occur “irrespectively of the object” (Freud, 1984, p. 262), but is intertwined with the loss of the foetus or baby.

Eng and Kazanjian (2003, p.5), like Butler, have noted Freud’s changing inscription of melancholia and also his assertion that both mourning and melancholia are “the reaction to the loss of a loved person . . . *or one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on*” [italics added] (Freud, 1917/1984, p. 252). They suggest that the multiplicity of losses indicated here opens the way to interpret melancholia as something other than a statically defined pathological failure to resolve loss. Instead, they assert that “melancholia creates a realm of traces open to signification” (2003, p. 4) and that the ‘condition’ “offers a capaciousness of meaning in relation to losses encompassing the individual and the collective, the spiritual and the material, the psychic and the social, the aesthetic and the political” (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003, p. 3). By this they mean that melancholia and its symptomatology may signify beyond the individual and his illness, and point to the *meanings* of loss in a broader cultural context.

In terms of miscarriage, stillbirth and abortion, then, I argue that melancholia does indeed point beyond the pathology of those women who exhibit Freud’s melancholic symptoms to reveal the political and cultural attitudes of Western societies towards pregnancy loss, motherhood and the women who are unable or do not want to bring a child to term. These attitudes I explore through the poetry of five Australian, American and African American poets: Gwendolyn Brooks’ “The Mother”

(1945/1963), Sylvia Plath's "Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices" (1962/1981), Anne Sexton's "The Abortion" (1962/1981), Judith Wright's "Stillborn" (1970/1986) and Lucille Clifton's "The Lost Baby Poem" (1972). The poems' ongoing engagement with pregnancy loss, speak not only to the crippling effects of the loss of the loved object, the baby or foetus, but to the loss of an idealised self. The loss of self and crisis of identity that the poems express, I will argue, expose the roles played by the prevailing medical, psychoanalytic, legal and social discourses and their attitudes to pregnancy loss, in exacerbating that very loss. Further, I will show, that the over-arching polarisation of women discussed above, results in a loss of an ideal feminine subject position, a narcissistic blow that manifests, both in psychical and physical terms, as an identification with its polar extreme, its abject other: Sue Gillett's (1998, n.p.) "doubly abjected mother-of-the-corpse".

II

A Silenced Voice:

The Cultural Non-Existence of Miscarriage and Stillbirth

Oakley, McPherson and Roberts (1990, p. 5) report that “world-wide, around one million women become pregnant everyday [and] at least half of these pregnancies end in miscarriage or stillbirth”. Reports suggest a more conservative (though still high) figure of around twenty per cent in western, industrialised countries (Layne, 1997, p. 294; Hindmarch, 2000, p. 16). Despite these figures which indicated that loss in pregnancy is a common and widespread experience, such maternal losses, at least in Western societies, seem veiled in a “conspiracy of silence (or denial)” (Oakley, et al, 1990, p. 104). Research indicates that women who have suffered miscarriage or stillbirth did not know, or did not realise that they knew, anyone who had suffered similarly (Reinharz, 1987, p. 235; Layne, 1997, p. 290). This research, alongside the lack of accepted rituals for mourning pregnancy loss (Oakley et al, 1990, p. 104) in western societies, testifies to this conspiracy of silence and denial, to what anthropologist Linda Layne (1997, p. 292) has called a “culturally sanctioned non-existence” of pregnancy loss. Whether this non-existence takes the form of silence, denial that pregnancy loss constitutes a grievable loss at all, or both, it insinuates itself across the spectrum of pregnancy loss, from the earliest miscarriage to the stillbirth of a full-term baby.¹

¹ It is not my intention to imply that all pregnancy losses are equivocal losses, nor that all such losses are always subject to the same degree of silence and denial. It is necessary to point out, however, that the divide between the terms ‘miscarriage’ and ‘stillbirth’ is an arbitrary one, subject to legalized changes both temporally and spatially.

Judith Wright and Sylvia Plath, both of whom experienced pregnancy loss, Wright, an ectopic pregnancy in 1956 (Brady, 1998, p. 196) and Plath, miscarriage in 1961 (Anselment, 1997, p. 32n), foreground this silence and denial in their respective poems, “Stillborn” and “Three Women”. Here, I will demonstrate how each poet engages this silence, arguing that ideologically contradictory attitudes towards the ‘life’ (or non-life) of the unborn child are, to a large degree, responsible for these silences and further that these silences disallow a ‘normal’ resolution of grief, encourage maternal blame and, therefore, lead to a melancholic self-reproach.

Wright’s “Stillborn” (1970/1986) uses a first person narrator to relate a third person plural experience of stillbirth, a ‘they’ of which the narrator may or may not be a part. This narrator offers an explicit engagement with the silence surrounding pregnancy loss. The first stanza of the poem reads:

Those who have once admitted
within their pulse and blood
the chill of that most loving
that most despairing child
known what is never told –
the arctic anti-god,
the secret of the cold.

Here stillbirth is defined as a chilling secret, “never told”, known only to those who have experienced it. In using the pronoun ‘those’, Wright implies a shared experience of loss and suffering, however, in actuality, the women suffer in isolation from others, both those others who share the experience of pregnancy loss and those who do not. The poem invokes here a sense of the presence of the unborn child in one’s

“pulse and blood”, in one’s most basic anatomical functions in a literal sense, and in one’s psychic existence at a metaphorical level and Wright conflates this presence, the ‘chill’ of this most loving and despairing child with “what is never told” in her description of this secret as “the secret of the cold”. This conflation, in the repeated use of the words chill, cold and arctic, gives the reader a sense that both the ‘chill of the child’ and “the secret of the cold” pulse through the women’s veins. The secret reverberates within, on a closed circuit, coursing through the women’s bodies but never flowing without. In the final stanza, the narrator intensifies this invocation of a secret confined within:

and I have heard them cry
when all else was lying still
‘O that I stand above
while you lie down beneath!’

The women’s grief is only given an outlet or, as indicated by the use of quotation marks, a voice, in isolation, when all else lies still. It is a cry of suffering that has no audience other than that of Wright’s narrator who, contrary to a traditional first person narrative voice, seems endowed with omniscience, a privileged access to the isolated voices of the women. Indeed, Wright’s use of this privileged narrative voice implies in itself, a distance between the grieving women and an outside audience.

In contrast to Wright’s “Stillborn” (1970/1986), in “Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices” (1962/1981), Plath uses three first person speakers who narrate their own vastly different experiences of pregnancy and birth. During the course of the poem, the first voice labours and gives birth to a wanted baby; the second suffers a miscarriage or stillbirth, while the third relinquishes her daughter after an unwanted

pregnancy that is possibly the result of rape². In combination, these three voices 'speak' to the wide variety of emotion and affect that the experience of pregnancy and birth may engender. Moreover, Plath's efforts to give voice to the multifaceted experience of pregnancy and birth acquire a very real, literal dimension when one considers that, as Ted Hughes (1981, p. 292) writes, Plath wrote the poem for radio and it was produced on the BBC's Third Programme, on 19 August 1962. However, whilst the three voices literally narrate their experiences, Plath only affords actual speech to the first voice, in references to her "words" and her "little lullaby" to her newborn son. Plath denies any form of oral interaction with others to the second and third voices, whose experiences of pregnancy and birth are less than ideal. At the onset of her miscarriage or stillbirth the second voice quotes her boss in the lines:

And the man I work for laughed: 'Have you seen something awful?
You are so white, suddenly.' And I said nothing.

Throughout the poem the second voice narrates her loss but does not literally 'speak' with, or to others in the poem, nor does she ever refer to her miscarriage or stillbirth in those terms. Instead, this voice only ever refers to her loss indirectly in lines such as "the small red seep" and "It is usual, they say, for such a thing to happen". She cannot speak in direct terms of her loss and suffers her grief in silence and isolation:

There is the moon in the high window. It is over.
How winter fills my soul! And the chalk light
Laying its scales on the windows, the windows of empty offices,
Empty schoolrooms, empty churches. O so much emptiness!
There is this cessation. This terrible cessation of everything.

² Plath's reference to "the great swan" recalls the myth of Leda who is raped by the god Zeus, disguised as a swan.

Here, Plath infers a sense of the second voice's isolation from the life that surrounds her in "the moon in the high window"³. She sees or senses in the moonlight the emptiness and cessation that surrounds her as if she has been deserted. Like Wright, Plath uses the stillness of night to foreground this sense of being alone in the world, of having no other to bear witness to and validate this grief. The second voice intensifies this sense of isolation in her references to her husband. Of the three voices, she is the only one to mention a husband or partner: He "will understand" and "love me through the blur of my deformity". He stands at a distance, however, from her loss, not appearing 'in person' until the final two stanzas of the poem:

I am at home in the lamplight. The evenings are lengthening.
I am mending a silk slip: my husband is reading.

In these lines there is a sense of some time having passed in "the evenings are lengthening". Her husband is not involved in her loss and grief but appears only in its aftermath when she thinks that she has "been healing". The two attend to their separate interests and there is no engagement between them over their loss; in fact, it remains only her loss, her "deformity"; a silenced and isolated but continuing 'ache'.

In contradiction to the interpretation of Plath's second voice as an account of pregnancy loss, the critic/academic David Holbrook (1976, p. 193) contends that the second voice's 'small red seep' is "a 'show' which indicates to the woman that she is pregnant". While a show certainly indicates pregnancy, it more accurately indicates the culmination of pregnancy, a sign of impending labour. He goes on to assert that this voice has given birth (1976, p. 198) and that the lines "The mirror gives back a

³ I return to the further significance of Plath's references to the moon in Chapter VI.

woman without deformity..." indicate that she has recovered her self-interest "after the intense preoccupation of the confinement" (1976, p. 198). I believe that Holbrook's assertions constitute a serious misinterpretation of the account that this voice gives, but I do not mean to suggest that Plath needed to be more literal, nor that any special insight is required to interpret the poem. Rather, interpretations such as Holbrook's demonstrate a typical and profound lack of knowledge and understanding of pregnancy loss and a refusal to engage with the subject of such a loss.

Holbrook's study provides a remarkable example of the non-existence of pregnancy loss in a broader cultural context. This non-existence is characterised by, not one, but several silences that overlap and sometimes beget one another. And these silences have at their heart contradictory attitudes towards the 'life' of the foetus and the contingency of life itself. The following statements, both quoted by Oakley, McPherson and Roberts (1990) and referring to stillbirth and miscarriage respectively, reflect this contradiction:

an article in the medical journal the *Lancet* in 1977 called the occurrence of "death in utero . . . extraordinarily chilling and repugnant" (p. 167);

'oh pooh, miscarriages,' an acquaintance said to me recently,
'miscarriages are nothing – everybody's had a miscarriage' (n.p.).

These statements strikingly reveal two affective responses to pregnancy loss that originate from opposite ends of an emotional spectrum, repugnance and indifference, and they situate stillbirth and miscarriage at those opposing ends. And yet, in reality, temporal and spatial arbitrariness characterise the divide between the two losses. For

example, Oakley et al (1990, pp. 12-13) report that in Great Britain at the time of publication, the death of a child after 28 weeks gestation but before birth constitutes a stillbirth, while in 2000 Hindmarch (2000, p. 16) writes that a death occurring as early as 20 weeks gestation constitutes stillbirth. Oakley et al (1990, p.13) also point out that

in 1960, 61 per cent of babies born weighing 1500 g . . . or under were born alive, compared with 78 per cent in 1981. Of those very low birthweight babies born in 1960, 33 per cent were still alive at the end of the first month of life, but this figure had more than doubled, becoming 68 per cent by 1981 . . . the mother of such an infant in 1960 may thus have thought of herself as having a miscarriage, whereas the same mother in 1980 may emerge . . . with a live and healthy baby.

Is the miscarriage, then, of a 27 week old foetus in 1960 any less 'chilling and repugnant' than the stillbirth of a baby of the same age in 2000? Or, for that matter, in 2005, is the woman who miscarries a 19 week old foetus meant to grieve any less than the woman in the adjacent hospital bed who has given birth to a stillborn baby of 21 weeks gestation? My point here is that the affective response to miscarriage and stillbirth, whether in the mother herself or the community in which she lives, cannot be stringently defined alongside the stringent definitions given to the terms miscarriage and stillbirth at any point in time. The mother who has experienced miscarriage or stillbirth may thus be subject to a reaction of indifference, repugnance or both.

These two ends of the spectrum, repugnance and indifference, lie at the core of the silences that permeate the discourse of pregnancy loss. Layne (2003, pp. 1886-1887) points out that advances in ante-natal and neo-natal care and an emphasis on happy

outcomes in publications about pregnancy have created an expectation (and an illusion) that pregnancy loss has been eliminated. Certainly, the rise and prescription of institutional ante-natal care for pregnant women in the twentieth century has seen a parallel drop in stillbirth, neo-natal and maternal mortality rates (Oakley, 1984, pp. 297-98). There can also be no doubt that increased knowledge of pregnancy-related problems, such as eclampsia and rhesus incompatibility, has contributed to these survival rates. However, as Oakley (1984, p. 33) attests, clinical ante-natal care had its roots in the “redefinition of obstetrical deaths as a social problem”. And at the heart of this social problem lay an assumption that such deaths were due to “problems of maternity or ‘mothercraft’, which in their turn are fundamentally problems of education” (Local Government Board, Great Britain, 1913, p. 330, cited by Oakley, 1984, p. 261). The institutionalisation of ante-natal care requires that women are constructed as uneducated and inept in the care of their babies and pregnancies and are thus at fault should any problems arise, in order for it to succeed in terms of ensuring that women present for such care. Oakley (1984, p. 237) presents this argument quite forcefully in stating that “women are deceived in assenting to [a] technological system of childbirth management by believing that only thus will they safely achieve motherhood”. Whilst I would not go so far as to say that the institution and on-going success of clinical ante-natal was, or is, based on a deliberate strategy of deception, I would argue that the on-going and voluntary participation of women in the institution certainly depends for its success on the perception that the medicalisation of pregnancy ensures positive outcomes.

Debra Pollock (1997, pp. 12-13) further asserts that this emphasis on positive outcomes extends to our cultural lore and anecdotes. She points out that our stories of pregnancy and birth focus on happy results, adding that such stories, where the mother, the baby or medical staff have triumphed over danger, disaster and death, deliver “order from disorder and pleasure from abandon, transgression and pain”. They expose “the possibility of death or deformity only to deny it . . . and, in turn, invite a sense of superiority to death, disaster, and deformity”. These narratives, that seem to follow a traditional plot structure of storytelling with beginning, climax and dénouement, are, according to Pollock (1997, p. 13), “ritually repeated” and lock “new parents into a narrative script that simply lacks room for stillbirth, miscarriage, abortion, and deformity”. These stories exclude and silence stories of failure, stories that end in death, rather than life.

Sue Gillett (1998, n.p.) writes that “our broad cultural faith in medical technology has divided birth from death as mutually incompatible categories. Birth, in our cultural symbology, is synonymous with Life”. To this I would add that, increasingly, throughout the twentieth century, medical technology has made pregnancy itself synonymous with life. Oakley (1984, pp.155-59) reports that by 1940 hormonal pregnancy tests were available, the foetal heart could be heard by stethoscope, the foetal skeleton was visible by x-ray and by 1957 ultrasound had begun to be used to visualise the foetus. Prior to these developments a woman’s sensory experience of the existence of her unborn baby was limited to an awareness of the baby’s movements and even then generally not until well after the first trimester. With these advances

come an engagement with the foetus that includes sight and sound for both the mother and the wider community. Alice Adams (1993, p. 269) speaks of her entrancement and romance with ultrasound images of foetal growth in the 1966 book *A Child is Born* (Furuhjelm, Ingleman-Sundberg & Wirsén). She describes the foetus in these images as “illuminated against a dark background . . . a kindly alien in orbit . . . the mother’s body is the empty universe in which the fetus creates itself”. Such advances in the auditory and visual perception of the foetus constitute pre-term ‘babies’ as individual subjects, with subject status and rights and a life of their own, a life that, while requiring the mother’s body for survival, is represented as independent of that body.

Contrary to the reality of the prevalence of pregnancy loss, such focuses on positive outcomes in pregnancy and the representations of independent life within the pregnant body make pregnancy loss seem unnatural, repugnant and abhorrent. Such losses threaten our tenuous and illusionary superiority to death, and speaking of such losses threatens to reveal the very disorder of our corporeal existence, the disorder that scientific discourse seeks to contain. This message must be silenced and thus isolates women who cannot sustain the life of a foetus or baby, inscribing them with difference, otherness, abjection.

At the farthest remove from a response of repugnance at pregnancy loss, lies one of indifference. Rosenfeld (1991, n.p.) reports that “previously it was assumed that women did not mourn the loss of an unborn child as they would the loss of a living

child”⁴. However, she goes on to cite a number of studies (Peppers & Knapp, 1990; Leppert & Pahlka, 1984; Hardin & Urbanus, 1986) that have found that there are “no differences in the intensity or the pattern of grief among women who had experienced a spontaneous abortion, stillbirth or neonatal death”. Nevertheless, despite such findings, Bourne and Lewis (1991, p. 1167), distinguishing miscarriage from stillbirth, assert that “a healthy individual should bounce back fairly rapidly from a miscarriage, and extended grief is an indication that something is not right”. Like Freud, Bourne and Lewis attribute pathology to grief that remains unrecognised as a valid reaction to the loss of a pregnancy. They fail to take into account the lack of opportunities to express and resolve such grief in culturally appropriate ways, or the fact that the repugnance which may greet foetal losses condemns women to abjection, to “a horrific silence of the flesh” (Gillett, 1998, n.p.). They go on to imply that the prevalence of miscarriage is one reason why one should not “make too much of miscarriage”. The two maintain, however, a conspicuous silence on the reasons why prevalence should invalidate extended grief and, for that matter, remain silent about what they define as ‘extended grief’. They do not consider that the taboo on speaking of pregnancy loss effectively negates prevalence in a social context, nor do they recognise here the arbitrary nature of the limits imposed on the terms ‘miscarriage’ and ‘stillbirth’. At what point of a pregnancy, then, does ‘extended grief’ become a valid reaction to a pregnancy loss?

⁴ Bourne and Lewis (1991, p. 1167) similarly report that since the 1970’s attitudes towards “perinatal bereavement have changed profoundly”.

Such indifferent attitudes towards at least certain pregnancy losses invalidate and pathologise grief over those losses. It is an attitude that does not take into account the increasing visual and auditory opportunities for “prenatal bonding” (Layne, 1997, p. 299) that medical technology provides. Furthermore, a grief that is deemed ‘not right’, and therefore deemed a sign of illness, is a grief that cannot be freely expressed, that can only be iterated to the self, in order to avoid the stigma of being labelled mentally abnormal. In this way the sanction against speaking one’s grief over pregnancy loss and the lack of appropriate cultural rituals for expressing that loss restricts access to opportunities that may help to lead to a resolution of that grief.

In ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, Freud (1917/1984, p. 252) asserts that any interference with the ‘normal’ process, and progress, of mourning is “useless or even harmful”, but he does not elaborate on what harmful effects this interference might produce. I would argue that the silence that greets pregnancy loss interferes with a ‘normal’ process of mourning, and *its* harmful effects may indeed be the symptoms of self-reproach and self-reviling that Freud attributes to a pathological failure to resolve loss. In contradiction to Freud, Butler (1997, p. 185) sees “the internal violence” wrought by melancholia as an “indictment of the social forms that have made certain kinds of losses ungrievable”. She writes that “where there is no public recognition or discourse through which . . . loss might be named and mourned, then [the symptoms of] melancholia take on cultural dimensions of contemporary consequence” (1997/2004, p. 250). In other words this non-recognition, this silence ‘speaks’, in the case of pregnancy loss, to not only the horror or indifference that such a loss

engenders but also to, as Pollock (1997, p. 14) suggests, a deeper story, one that attributes maternal blame to such a loss. A cultural silence that attributes blame may well produce the very symptoms that Freud, ignoring the social context in which such symptoms arise, deems pathological in the individual. The poems do indeed suggest maternal blame, self-reproach and reviling and I discuss this further in Chapter IV.

III

Caught in the Crossfire:

The Lost Voice of Abortion Loss

Despite the effective legalisation of abortion in the United States in 1973 (Petchesky, 1981, p. 209), continuing demonstrations and violence at abortion clinics in the United States (Jarvis Thomson, 1995, n.p.) dramatically attest to the fact that opposition to abortion has not abated⁵. The abortion debate remains a contentious issue, one that the strident voices of both the pro-life and pro-choice movements have kept alive in our cultural consciousness, and perhaps conscience. At a discursive and political level, silence does not characterise this debate. But what of the women who undergo abortions? And what of the women who experience grief or ambivalence over their choice to have an abortion? Are they free to speak, to express this grief or ambivalence?

In this chapter I will demonstrate how Lucille Clifton's "The Lost Baby Poem", Gwendolyn Brooks' "The Mother" and Anne Sexton's "The Abortion" invoke the difficulties women face in speaking of their abortions and expressing the negative effects abortion has had on their lives. All three poems were written prior to 1973 and whilst I acknowledge that "an illegal or self-induced abortion . . . is painful, dangerous and cloaked in the guilt of criminality" (Rich, 1986, p. 267), I will argue that the poems reveal problems of address when it comes to speaking of abortion, that

⁵ As does the current emotive debate in the Australian parliament over whether the Federal Health Minister Tony Abbott, a pro-life supporter, or the Therapeutic Drugs Administration Board should have control over the distribution of the 'abortion pill' RU 486.

this reflects the persistent social and moral stigma of aborting one's child which, in turn contributes to the silencing of women who have abortions, regardless of the legal status of abortion.

Barbara Johnson (1986, p. 36) writes of Lucille Clifton's "The Lost Baby Poem" that it is "unclear whether the child has been lost through abortion or through miscarriage". In this section I treat the poem alongside those that deal explicitly with abortion, Gwendolyn Brooks' "The Mother" and Anne Sexton's "The Abortion", because the three poems share characteristics in terms of their structures of address. "The Lost Baby Poem" is a first person monologue in which the narrator seems to speak directly to the child she has lost through induced or spontaneous abortion. Johnson (1986, pp. 28-30) points out that this address constitutes an apostrophe in the sense that "it involves the direct address of an absent, dead or inanimate being by a first-person speaker" who "throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee".

The first two lines of the poem read:

the time i dropped your almost body down
down to meet the waters under the city

In addressing the baby, Clifton attempts to give it life and form, however, at the same time, she undermines this personification in her description of the baby's body as an "almost body" and in the final line of the poem's second stanza:

if you were here i could tell you these
and some other things

In using the subjunctive mood in these lines, Clifton throws doubt on the construction of the baby as the direct addressee of the poem, "*if you were here i could tell you*".

Here the speaker reveals a contradiction between the 'you' who is the grammatical object of address but at the same time cannot be told. Who, then, does the speaker address? In the poem's first stanza the speaker states that she has dropped the baby into a city's sewerage system, "the waters under the city", but this is followed by the lines:

what did i know about waters rushing back
what did i know about drowning
or being drowned

These lines suggest that the same waters that have carried away the almost life of the child have returned to drown the speaker herself. Both are engulfed; the lost baby literally and the mother figuratively, by the grief, guilt and ambivalence that the pregnancy loss has provoked. In this passage, Clifton correlates the fate of the mother with that of her lost baby, and, in the same way that the waters return, the narrator's outwardly directed address returns to her, unheard and unanswered by the object of that address.

Johnson (1986, p. 32) notes that in Brooks' "The Mother" "the structures of address are shifting and complex". Like Clifton's poem the first section of "The Mother" addresses a 'you', but here this 'you' is not an aborted baby, but seems to be the mother herself. The first lines of the poem read:

Abortions do not let you forget.
You remember the children you got that you
did not get.

The second line places the narrator as both the grammatical subject and the object of address, but in the preceding line 'abortions' are the grammatical subject. Abortions

assume control of the speaker, forcing the 'you' to remember the children and to muse on a future devoid of the positive and negative aspects of mothering those children:

You will never neglect or beat
Them, or silence or buy with a sweet.
You will never wind up the sucking thumb
Or scuttle off ghosts that come.

These lines seem to imply that the mother will never have the *opportunity* to neglect, beat, silence or buy these children. However, by including 'you will never silence them' Brooks invites an alternate reading; that these aborted children cannot be silenced. She reinforces this reading in the first lines of the poem's second section:

I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my
dim killed children.

These lines mark the point in the poem where the speaker ends her second person self-address and begins her first person monologue. But even here it is the voices of her aborted children that have initiated this monologue. Her words are a response to the voices, the address of her aborted children. Johnson (1986, p. 33) points out that in this poem "the initiative of speech seems always to lie in the other". The mother, as always addressed by abortions and aborted children, reflects the silencing of women who have abortions, but who remain continually addressed by the politics of both pro-life and pro-choice adherents. In the poem's first section, abortions both force a continuing remembrance of the aborted children and initiate the narrator's self-address and in the second the voices of those children initiate the speaker's response. She exists in order to respond to them, to appease these phantoms "at the breasts they never suck".

Johnson (1986, p. 34) notes that, by the end of the poem, the speaker writes herself into silence, in the reduction of her vocabulary to repetition and a final line that consists of a single word:

Believe me, I loved you all.
Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved you
All.

Whilst indeed there is here a sense of the finality of the speaker's words, that nothing more can be said, I would add that her entire address to her aborted children is a reiteration and that it *cannot* result in finality. Her address is not stated here for the first and only time. Brooks uses the past tense "I have said" to indicate that the speaker's words are a repetition; the speaker's words cannot affect an 'end' to the consequences of her abortions. In the first line of the poem the speaker has already stated that there is no end to abortions and she intensifies this in her struggle to make clear cut pronouncements in the aftermath of those abortions: "Oh, what shall I say, how is the truth to be said?" and in her inability to define the 'lives' of the children:

Since anyhow you are dead.
Or rather, or instead,
You were never made.

Brooks' speaker may write herself into silence but the reiteration of her address and the irresolution evident in these lines indicate that she is bound to return endlessly to responding to the address of her abortions and her children. This irresolution and repetition points to the narrator's continued engagement with her losses, an unresolved grief that suggests a Freudian pathological melancholia.

Like Brooks, Anne Sexton uses a shifting pattern of address in “The Abortion”. The poem begins with a two line italicised refrain: “*Somebody who should have been born/ is gone*” which twice interrupts the poem’s first person narration. Johnson (1986, p. 35) likens this interruption to “a voice-over narrator taking superegoistic control of the moral bottom line”. She adds that the refrain “puts the first person narrator’s authority into question without necessarily constituting the voice of a separate entity”. In the fourth stanza, Sexton reinforces this sense of a split between a self who narrates the circumstances of her abortion and a self who judges those choices:

and me wondering when the ground would break,
and me wondering how anything fragile survives.

Rather than following a first person narratorial pattern that would see these lines read ‘and I wondered’, Sexton substitutes the first person object pronoun ‘me’ for the ‘I’. In referring to herself as the object of her narration, the speaker seems to stand outside herself⁶, watching and perceiving an other who is about to have an abortion. The speaker enhances this sense of the self as simultaneously an other in the final stanza:

Yes, woman, such logic will lead
to loss without death. Or say what you meant,
you coward . . . this baby that I bleed.

In this stanza the speaker explicitly addresses herself but in doing so she also reveals that the narrative which precedes this stanza is not outwardly directed but only iterated to the self.

⁶ A point I shall return to in Chapter VI.

The three poems discussed here all invoke problems of address when it comes to speaking of abortion. Addresses to the self and to aborted children reveal the difficulties these speakers face in directing their speech, their grief and their ambivalence about their abortions to an outside audience. Judith Jarvis Thomson (1995, n.p.) points out that the heart of the pro-life movement's argument against abortions seems to lie in its assertion that "abortion at any stage, from conception on, is a violation of the right to life, and thus is murder". However, she goes on to note that "many opponents of abortion do make exceptions. For example, they are prepared to allow abortion where the pregnancy is due to rape or incest, or where the woman's life is at risk if the pregnancy continues". Such exceptions fundamentally undermine the argument that embryos or foetuses have an intrinsic right to life. All lives, it would seem, are not created equal, at least for some opponents of abortion. As Petchesky (1981, p. 220) asserts, the abortion issue resonates beyond the status of the foetus to include "many social and political meanings – about the family, sexuality [and] the position of women." She points out that the real heart of anti-abortion rhetoric lies in a desire to control women's sexuality. She states that "if a woman can control her pregnancies, there is no built-in sanction against her having sex when, how, and with whom she pleases" (Petchesky, 1981, p. 229). To speak of one's abortion then, is to reveal an active sexuality that does not have procreation as its sole purpose. It is to risk a charge of promiscuity when a restrained, passive sexuality is the feminine ideal.

Zucker observes (1999, p. 768) that throughout western history “‘mandatory motherhood’ has been promoted and enforced” and that this mandate has “found [its] way into existing psychological theories about women’s identities, roles and positions in society”. She adds that this mandate and these theories pathologise women who choose to abort, who choose not to bear and raise the foetus they carry. Petchesky (1981, p. 233) argues further that pro-life ideology embraces “the values of motherhood as they have been propagated since the late eighteenth century: as woman’s true destiny, her ‘calling’, that which defines her above all else”. In the face of a pervasive ideology that deems women who choose not to mother as sick or abnormal, women who have abortions must remain silent or be vulnerable to a charge of abnormality and pathology.

Whilst pro-life ideologies condemn women who abort to silence at a personal level, at a political level the pro-choice movement plays its part too, in disallowing the expression of grief or ambivalence over an abortion. Borgmann and Weiss (2003, p. 41) write that supporters of abortion on demand often react to a societal discomfort with the issue of abortion by shying away from open discussion of and support for abortion. They suggest that this silence “plays into the hands” of anti-abortion activists who “want the public to associate abortion with secrecy, trauma, stigma, guilt, fear and shame”. Pro-choice supporters, it would seem, are in a double bind. On the one hand silence reinforces these associations; whilst on the other to acknowledge that abortion can produce negative effects, including ambivalence and grief, on the individual, seems to bolster the anti-abortion cause. This political resistance to

acknowledging that abortions may engender negative affects in the women who have them effectively invalidates responses of ambivalence or grief and denies these women the opportunity to openly express these emotions.

The imposition of silence on women who choose to have an abortion, may provide, as I have argued in the previous chapter, Freud's 'harmful interference' with the normal progression of mourning. More than this, however, it isolates them from support and understanding, and other women who have experienced ambivalence and grief over an abortion. These silences, isolation and lack of support leave only the condemning voices of pro-life adherents, who loudly characterise women who choose abortions as immoral, and "wantonly and selfishly sexual" (Stotland, 2001, n.p.). In the face of this pervasive characterisation, these women, cannot, in Butler's (1997/2004, p. 248) words, repudiate an identification with the figure of this immoral and promiscuous abject woman.

IV

Maternal Blame in the Discourses of

Miscarriage and Stillbirth

Freud writes (1917/1984, p. 260) that “self-reproaches to the effect that the mourner himself is to blame for the loss of the loved object”, are a sign that mourning has slipped over into a pathological melancholia. He adds that these self-reproaches are really directed against the lost object which has become a melancholic identification in the ego. However, as I have discussed in the preceding chapters, factors such as the silence and horror or indifference that greet pregnancy loss encourage maternal blame and interfere with a ‘normal’ progression of grief. In this chapter I will demonstrate how Plath and Wright reflect the blame, guilt and self-reproach following a miscarriage or stillbirth and argue that these effects are not necessarily a sign of a pathological identification with the lost object, but are a consequence of the part medical discourse plays in situating blame with the women who have experienced such losses.

In “Three Women”, Plath reiterates the commonness of pregnancy loss in the lines:

It is usual, they say, for such a thing to happen.
It is usual in my life, and the lives of others.
I am one in five, something like that. I am not hopeless.

These lines indicate the naturalness, the commonness of, in particular miscarriage. Despite this, a sense of the speaker’s fundamental culpability and an air of self-recrimination pervade the poems. In “Three Women” Plath’s use of first person

declarative constructions is pronounced across all three voices. However, fundamental differences lie in Plath's execution of them. In the second voice these are often marked with an agency, both grammatical and semantic, that is lacking in the first and third. Consider the lines:

The sun is down. I die. I make a death
and

I am restless. Restless and useless. I, too, create corpses.

Both the lines suggest agential action, if not intention. The "I" is the 'maker' and 'creator' of death and corpses. The following two lines seem to subvert this sense of agency:

Tap, tap, tap steel pegs. I am found wanting
and

I am accused. I dream of massacres.

Here, Plath uses passive construction to suggest that the speaker is characterised, or acted upon by someone or something else. But 'who' finds lack, 'who' accuses?

Again and again it is the second voice who finds the lack in herself:

Quiet, like the little emptinesses I carry.
Blunt and flat enough to feel no lack. I feel a lack.

In contrast the first person declaratives in the first and third voices suggest a sense of being in itself, and of being acted upon. The first voice, the birth of her child impending, tastes, sees, hears and describes herself and then her labour as follows:

When I walk out I am a great event.
I do not have to think, or even rehearse.
What happens in me will happen without attention.

A power is growing on me, an old tenacity.
I am breaking apart like the world. There is this blackness,
This ram of blackness. I fold my hands on a mountain.
The air is thick. It is thick with this working.
I am used. I am drummed into use.

These lines suggest a certain power of the labouring mother – but it is a power, an *old* tenacity, that is outside her control. The first voice is “used” by this power and although it comes from within her body it is, at once, outside of her individual body. This power is part of her biological function as a woman and she does not need “to think, or even rehearse”, only passively let this archaic power do its work.

The third voice, about to give birth to an unwanted child, remembers the conception of her baby:

And the great swan, with its terrible look,
Coming at me, like a castle, from the top of the river . . .

I wasn't ready. The white clouds rearing
Aside were dragging me in four directions
I wasn't ready.

The swan comes *at* her: she is a passive object unprepared for intercourse or pregnancy (or both). Plath reinforces this sense of the third voice being acted upon, of being not responsible for her pregnancy when, the birth of her child immanent, the third voice says:

I am a mountain now, among mountainy women.
The doctors move among us as if our bigness
Frightened the mind. They smile like fools.
They are to blame for what I am, and they know it . . .

Plath does not elaborate on the doctors' blameworthiness. Perhaps she points to a collective male culpability for sexual assault or the difficulties women faced in

obtaining safe and legal abortions before 1973. Whatever the case, it is clear that this voice is given no agency in the conception of her baby, her pregnancy or delivery.

Paradoxically, it is the first and third voices who are, despite their lack of agency, full and plentiful. The first, in her pregnancy, is “a great event” and “a seed about to burst”, and in her motherhood, “a river of milk” and “a warm hill”. The third, despite her ambivalence, is a mountain. It is only when she becomes a ‘bad’ mother by relinquishing her newborn daughter and motherhood that she becomes empty, asking “What is it I miss?”

Plath’s second voice attributes to herself both a lack and blame for the power to produce death. This self-accusation finds a parallel in Wright’s “Stillborn”. The final stanza of the poem reads:

Alive, they should be dead
Who cheated their own death,
And I have heard them cry
When all else was lying still
‘O that I stand above
While you lie down beneath!’
Such women weep for love
Of one who drew no breath
And in the night they lie
giving the breast to death.

In similar fashion to “Three Women”, in the line “giving the breast to death” Wright constructs her subjects as nurturers of death. This line can be seen as both an agential or passive position; the women ‘feed’ death, or Death feeds on them. However, the expression ‘giving the breast’, a common and benign alternative to breastfeeding, semantically implies, in the word ‘giving’, a free act. In any case, whether one

chooses to interpret this line in an active or passive sense, the result is the same – a nurturance of death. In these lines there is an insinuation of guilt, made both by Wright's narrator, whose subjects have "cheated their own deaths", and the subjects themselves in their words "'O that I stand above/ While you lie down beneath'".

The sense of culpability, of guilt and of complicity with death that run throughout the two poems stands in direct conflict with Plath's invocation of the prevalence and, in many cases, unavailability of miscarriage and stillbirth. And yet medical discourses, both prior to and since the medicalisation of pregnancy, have consistently implicitly and explicitly generated contradictions to this message. Ann Oakley (1984, p. 213), in charting the ascendancy of clinical ante-natal care in the 20th century, reports that

when antenatal care began, a few per cent of pregnant women were regarded as 'at risk' of their own or their fetuses' mortality and morbidity. The task of antenatal care was to screen a population of basically normal pregnant women in order to pick up the few who were at risk of disease or death. Today the situation is reversed, and the object of antenatal care is to screen a population suffering from the pathology of pregnancy for the few women who are normal enough to give birth with the minimum of midwifery attention.

A redefinition of pregnancy as pathology necessarily implies that there are possible 'cures' for any problems that may arise. Indeed, despite protestations that the majority of early pregnancy losses in particular are inevitable, modern, empirically based remedies have been put forward and, like their earlier counterparts, have invariably focussed on restrictions of maternal behaviour or diagnosis of maternal problems. Oakley (1984, p. 17) reports that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries advice to pregnant women as to the avoidance of foetal harm consisted of admonishments to avoid dietary irregularity, excessive laughing, immoderate

dancing, conjugal enjoyments, excessive socialising and disturbances of the mind. Whilst one may today, be amused by some of this 'advice', it contains many similarities to that being espoused by the end of the twentieth century. Oakley, McPherson and Roberts (1990, p. 45) report that "in *perhaps* about half of all miscarriages, it is *possible* to identify some factor or factors which *might* have contributed to the *likelihood* of miscarriage" [italics added]. Despite the authors' care in the wording of this statement (indicated by italics) to avoid making any definitive claims as to the causes of miscarriage, these factors *are* listed and discussed in terms of those problems that may arise in the foetus, the father and the mother. Two foetal problems discussed by the authors are chromosomal and non-chromosomal abnormalities, arising from either "one-off accidents that occur during the formation of individual egg and sperm cells" (Oakley et al, 1990, p. 47), or situations where one of the parents themselves carries a chromosomal abnormality"⁷ (Oakley et al, 1990, p. 47). The three examples of non-chromosomal abnormalities that are given are spina bifida (spinal cord abnormalities), anencephaly (foetus develops without brain) and exomphalos (foetus develops without an abdominal wall). Only spina bifida is discussed in any detail here, including the possibility that taking folic acid supplements before and during the early stages of pregnancy may help in its prevention. Although it is not specified in this text, my own experiences of pregnancy tell me that this advice is only directed at mothers and not fathers. Fathers, however, are not delivered completely of responsibility when it comes to factors that may possibly affect the foetus. Listed here (Oakley et al, 1994, pp. 53-63) are paternal age, exposure to lead and smoking.

⁷ These problems obviously implicate either the mother or the father.

By far, the greatest number of problems seems to be associated with the maternal. Those that are discussed here (Oakley, McPherson & Roberts, 1994, pp. 49-68) include anatomical abnormalities such as uterine malformations and cervical incompetence, fibroids, immunological mechanisms, hormonal deficiencies, maternal age, maternal psychological factors, including stress, contraceptive use, previously induced abortion, previous miscarriage, sexual intercourse, vaginal examinations, alcohol use, smoking, diet, including advice on the avoidance on certain foods linked with listeriosis, occupation, working, chemical exposure, lead exposure, irradiation, ultrasound, drug use, polycystic ovarian syndrome, accidents, and to this I would add placental insufficiency. Although the discussion of many of these problems contain disclaimers as to the verifiability of the evidence that they cause pregnancy loss, the fact remains that this staggering list *is* headed “Factors which may affect miscarriage” and, like its seventeenth and eighteenth century counterparts, contains many examples of a focus on maternal behaviour and emotional state. Restrictions on diet and work and the prescription of certain medications necessarily implies that to ignore such guidelines amounts to a neglect of the health of one’s baby, while the continuing emphasis on a woman’s psychological well-being again suggests that her deficiencies, her deviations from a ‘normal’ state of mind has a direct bearing on foetal survival. Oakley et al (1994, p. 53) do point out that there is “no proof whatsoever” that psychological problems cause pregnancy loss but in contradiction to this they state that “it is also quite possible that the seeming effectiveness of some of the treatments for miscarriage . . . is not due to the treatment as such, but rather to the

mother feeling less anxious because something is being done” (Oakley et al, 1994, p. 63). In other words, certain treatments offered may provide merely a placebo effect, solving the *real* problem of a woman’s emotional defectiveness.

I do not wish to imply that the known ‘possible’ causes of pregnancy loss are invalid. I simply want to show how the genealogy and preponderance of knowledge, whether obstetrical, gynaecological, genetic, embryological, foetological or psychological, about these causes either directly or indirectly imply problems of a maternal origin. Nor do I wish to suggest that the medical establishment explicitly blames women for problems they may have of a chromosomal, anatomical or immunological nature. However, as Hindmarch (2000, p. 16) writes, medical terminology such as ‘placental insufficiency’ and ‘cervical incompetence’ encourages blame. I would go further and suggest that not only do such terms encourage maternal blame, but that they imply the lack, failure and inadequacy of a woman’s body in that body’s inability to nurture and sustain life and in its deviation from the ‘normal’ female body.

Such determinations of maternal blame stand in direct conflict to a discourse which suggests that a large number of pregnancy losses are unexplainable or inevitable. In fact, a discourse that attributes blame in certain cases of pregnancy loss but does not attempt to explain a large number of others perhaps feeds a woman’s fear of her own responsibility in the death of her child (Was it something I did, ate, drank, thought, did not do, did not eat and so on). In addition to the attribution of blame, these discursive productions of the causes of pregnancy loss attribute both lack, whether

psychological or somatic, and agency, whether that agency amounts to a wilful failure to curb or augment one's behaviours and lifestyle, or a monstrous feminine psychological agency that imposes its defectiveness on the pregnant body. Rather than reflecting a pathological disposition then, blame and guilt over the loss of a pregnancy indicates a failure to mirror an identificatory ideal of psychological and somatic feminine nurturance, fertility and passivity. Unable to assume this subject position, women who experience pregnancy loss suffer not only the loss of a baby but also Freud's "narcissistic blow": a loss of their right to identify with an ego-ideal and therefore, a relegation to an abject position outside the boundaries of that ideal.

V

Sin, Guilt and Impurity in the Construction of Women who Abort

Rosenfeld (1992, p. 137) reports that after a sense of relief, the most common emotional response to abortion is guilt. Where Freud would see this guilt as an indication of pathology, Stotland (2001, p. 27) writes that “the psychiatric aspects of abortion exemplify the impossibility of discussing the impact of a life experience outside the social context in which it occurs” [sic]. In this chapter I will show how Clifton, Brooks and Sexton engage the guilt and self-reproach that may follow an abortion and argue, as in the preceding chapter, that these responses are not necessarily a symptom of a pathological mental illness, but rather reflect the social context in which abortion occurs and the moral and legal attitudes towards women who have abortions.

Lucille Clifton’s “The Lost Baby Poem” implicitly imparts a sense of self-reproach for the death of a foetus. Barbara Johnson (1986, p. 36) has pointed out that, in this poem, “it [is] unclear whether the child has been lost through abortion or through miscarriage” and that this ambiguity “points to the notion that any death of a child is perceived as a crime committed by the mother, something a mother ought by definition to be able to prevent” (1986, p. 38). The first stanza of the Clifton poem reads:

the time i dropped your almost body down
down to meet the waters under the city

and run one with the sewage to the sea
what did i know about waters rushing back
what did i know about drowning or being drowned

In stark contrast to the benign sense of a baby lost in the title of the poem these lines suggest the narrator's complicity in the death; whether literal, in the case of a miscarried foetus that has either fallen or been placed into a drain, or metaphoric, in the narrator's conflation of herself with an abortionist.

The narrator re-stresses her blame in the third and final stanza of the poem:

if I am ever less than a mountain
for your definite brothers and sisters
let the rivers pour over my head
let the seas take me for a spiller
of seas let black men call me stranger
always for your never named sake

Here the narrator makes it clear that she must atone for the loss of her baby by being a "mountain", a protector, shelter and tower of strength, for her living children. She also establishes the terms of her punishment should she fail to prove herself a mountain for them; she must drown as her baby has done. In referring to herself as a "spiller of seas" the narrator implies that her crime has been to waste life, whether one takes this line to mean that she has spilled the seas as one would spill blood, or that she literally conflates herself with a 'spiller', a fishing trawl line that drains the sea of life.

In the second stanza of the poem, however, the speaker tempers this self-reproach and blame by introducing the social circumstances that would have made the birth of her baby perhaps less desirable than its loss:

you would have been born into winter
in the year of the disconnected gas
and no car we would have made the thin
walk over Genessee hill into the Canada wind
to watch you slip like ice into strangers hands

Johnson (1986, p. 36) points out that here Clifton invokes “a life of hardship, flight and loss . . . [conflating] the scene of Eliza’s escape in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* with the exile of draft resisters during the Vietnam War”. In doing so Clifton reflects on the social and racial marginalisation of black Americans. During the Vietnam War Murray (1971, p. 71) noted that “the burden of the draft has fallen disproportionately on black, as it has on lower-class youth in general” and he pointed to a number of factors that accounted for this disparity. He asserted that due to discrimination in education and employment, few black Americans attended college or graduate school and so could not gain draft deferments on educational or occupational grounds. They were also less likely to be rejected for the draft for physical reasons because they had less access to regular medical care and were thus unaware of any medical conditions they may have had. They were also less sophisticated than whites in regard to a knowledge of which conditions would grant them a deferment (Murray, 1971, pp. 69-70).

In Brooks too, one sees blame and guilt alongside an inability to control the circumstances under which abortions become necessary. In her address to her aborted children, Brooks’ narrator establishes the guilt she feels when she asks “Though why should I whine,/ Whine that the crime was other than mine?”. She emphasises this guilt by using the vocabulary of immorality and crime, “sinned”, “seized”, “stole”,

“poisoned” to describe her actions in aborting those children. However, she questions the assumption of her own guilt by qualifying these statements with “if” and in the line “Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate.” The narrator feels that a crime has been committed against her children and that blame needs to be attributed but she cannot firmly establish where this blame lies.

In Sexton’s “The Abortion” the two line refrain that echoes through the poem continually draws the reader away from the speaker’s narration to censure her, whether from within or without. In the final lines of the poem this censure comes explicitly from within the speaker:

Yes, woman, such logic will lead
To loss without death. Or say what you meant,
you coward . . . this baby that I bleed.

Here the speaker turns on herself and assumes responsibility and blame for her abortion. The final line can be read in two ways; the baby is bleeding from the narrator’s body or the narrator is bleeding the baby in the sense that she has caused the baby itself to bleed. While both readings signal the narrator’s guilt and self-reproach, the second gives a clear sense that the speaker feels that she has murdered her baby. This second reading constructs the speaker as a murderer and strongly reflects pro-life ideology, which propounds “that a human being’s life begins at conception” (Jarvis Thomson, 1995, n.p).

Sexton confounds the speaker’s assumption of guilt and blame in her reference to the Grimm brothers’ fairytale, “Rumpelstiltskin”. The miller’s daughter of the tale is

forced to spin gold from straw for the greedy king because of her father's boastfulness. When Rumpelstiltskin appears and offers to complete the task for her, she is forced into a bargain to save her own life that will see her give up her first born child. After his birth, Rumpelstiltskin comes to claim the child but takes pity on the girl and suggests another bargain; if she can discover his name she may keep the child. She eventually triumphs, answering his question and keeping her child. But the narrator of the poem cannot win in such a way. The nameless abortionist is not Rumpelstiltskin and no bargain will allow the speaker to keep her child. One can perceive in the tale the miller's daughter's powerlessness over the course her own life takes. She is always at the mercy of others; her father's boastfulness, the king's greed and Rumpelstiltskin's pity. In identifying herself with the miller's daughter, the speaker of the poem reveals her own lack of choice and impotence in controlling the course of her life.

Whilst the three poems discussed here clearly demonstrate a sense of guilt, blame and self-reproach, this stands alongside a powerlessness to make any other choice.

Abortions certainly give women a degree of power over their own lives and bodies but the poems reveal that, in some cases, the decision to have an abortion results from an underlying impotence, an inability to control one's social and financial circumstances and an inability to adequately and safely control one's reproductive life.

This ambiguity, between guilt and power, innocence and powerlessness, reflects too, the stringent divide between the construction of the ‘good’ woman and the ‘bad’.

Carol Gilligan (1982, pp. 70-71) asserts that the choice to have an abortion brings women “into conflict with the conventions of femininity, particularly the moral equation of goodness with self-sacrifice”. The “good woman”, she adds, puts others before self and “masks assertion in evasion”. Freud (1932/1991, p. 149) similarly suggests that a preference for “passive aims” characterises female psychology, adding that “passive aims” are not the same as passivity and the achievement of these aims may require “a large amount of activity”. Both writers imply here that femininity is a mask or, as Butler (1993, p. 1) asserts, a performance of a “regulatory ideal”. Perhaps then, the ambiguity evident in the speakers’ refusal to emphatically assert their responsibility over the choice to have abortions can be read as an attempt to reclaim this mask, a non-assertive, self-sacrificing and powerless feminine subject position.

This reading, alongside the sense of criminality, guilt and self-reproach in the poems points to the loss of, not only pregnancy and motherhood, but an ego-ideal. These women suffer Freud’s (1917/1984, p. 262) “narcissistic blow to the ego” and their guilt and self-reproach reflect not a pathological melancholia but the loss of a sense of the self as a mirror of an imposed feminine ideal

VI

The Anti-Mother:

Subjectivity and Abjection after Pregnancy Loss

Elizabeth Grosz (1994, p. 58) writes that one's self-conception "is directly linked to the social meaning and value of the sexed body". For women this sense of self relies heavily on both their physical and emotional abilities to produce and nurture children, thus the experiences of miscarriage, stillbirth and abortion assault this sense of an ideal self. In this chapter I will discuss how my five selected poems reveal an alienation from, and loss of this nurturing and fertile ideal and display, instead, an identification with the figure of the "doubly abjected mother-of-the corpse" (Gillett, 1996, n.p.), the literal embodiment of the construction of the feminine as death-bearing.

In "Three Women" Plath explicitly addresses the loss of an ideal self in the aftermath of a foetal loss when her second voice states "I am dying as I sit. I lose a dimension". This line suggests not only the death of a foetus but that of a part of the self. Plath further emphasises this loss when the second voice refers to herself in the third person in the lines "the mirror gives back a woman without deformity" and "This woman who meets me in windows – she is neat". These lines reveal a split between her inner and outer selves. Her external self remains unchanged, but she specifically equates her pregnancy loss with bodily deformity in the lines:

I can love my husband, who will understand.
Who will love me through the blur of my deformity
As if I had lost an eye, a leg, a tongue.

She cannot reconcile her unchanged, outer reflection with an inner self that she perceives as permanently marred, deformed and altered by the loss of her pregnancy.

Plath enhances this invocation of a self deformed by pregnancy loss with numerous allusions to nature. These allusions are pronounced across all three voices but Plath employs subtle differences in the second voice that cast this voice beyond the sphere of normal womanhood and into an abject otherness. As the three women labour, references to the sea and the moon suggest the archaic connections between the phases of the moon, tidal regularity and the cyclical and rhythmical nature of women's corporeal existence in terms of reproduction. Plath's first voice declares:

The moon's concern is more personal:
She passes and repasses, luminous as a nurse.

and

Waiting lies heavy on my lids. It lies like sleep,
Like a big sea. Far off, far off, I feel the first wave tug
Its cargo of agony toward me, inescapable, tidal.

These lines invoke both a woman's menstrual cycle and the 'ebb and flow' of labour pains. Here, Plath associates the sea and tides with the birth of new life and emphasises, in her use of the word "inescapable", the naturalness of the process of labour and birth, as well as the naturalisation of women's supposedly innate corporeal links to nature. Similarly, the third voice describes the lights of the delivery room as "flat red moons . . . dull with blood" Here again, Plath points out the connection between menstruation, reproduction and nature. In characterising defilement as one form of the abject, Kristeva (1982, p. 71) distinguishes menstrual blood from other

excremental products such as urine and faeces by suggesting that the former “stands for the danger [death within life] issuing from within the identity. Whether in terms of menstruation or post-partum bleeding, blood that issues from the uterus symbolises the lack of life within the uterus. In the above lines, Plath aligns reproductive blood with the sea, the tides and the moon, standard symbols of feminine corporeality, and whilst, as Kristeva understands it, this blood’s association with non-life remains abject, it does not seep outside its associations with that femininity.

Plath’s second voice too, refers to the same metaphors for the feminine:

There is the moon in the high window.
It is she that drags the blood-black sea around
Month after month . . .

In the first voice, Plath specifically aligns the sea with labour and the bringing forth of new life, but in the above lines the sea becomes oozing, blood-filled and lifeless. A further reference to reproductive blood lies in the lines:

It is a love of death that sickens everything.
A dead sun stains the newsprint. It is red.

Here, Plath invokes the sun, symbol of life, light and reason and, therefore, the non-feminine. But this sun, like the sea above, oozes blood. In her pregnancy loss, the second voice has brought forth death, and this death seeps outside its feminine boundaries to infect and taint the “sun”, a symbol of the masculine, and “newsprint”, a symbol of culture rather than nature. Plath gives further emphasis to this in her very use of the word ‘sun’ with its homophonic connection to ‘son’, especially when one considers that the poem was originally produced for radio.

In the first voice Plath associates pregnancy and birth with the fertility of nature, “leaves and petals attend” the labouring woman and in her new motherhood “dawn flowers”, swifts shriek and cows moo. Even the third voice, who gives up her baby, sees pregnancy as a time of fecundity:

The flowers in this room are red and tropical.
They have lived behind glass all their lives,
they have been cared for tenderly.

In these lines the third voice likens new-born babies to exotic, hothouse flowers who have been nurtured and protected within the warmth and safety of the uterine walls.

In contrast, coldness, barrenness and drought characterise the second voice’s descriptions of herself:

She is the vampire of us all. So she supports us,
Fattens us, is kind. Her mouth is red.
I know her. I know her intimately-
Old winter-face, old barren one, old time bomb;

These little black twigs do not think to bud,
Nor do these dry, dry gutters dream of rain.

In these lines the second voice suggests her intimacy with a cold, barren, death-bearing and monstrous, archaic femininity, and associates herself with a dry and barren landscape. In her barrenness, the second voice cannot lay claim to, nor identify with an ideal femininity, one that is fertile and abundant. She can only attempt an enactment, a masquerade of this ideal identity:

I draw on the old mouth.
The red mouth I put by with my identity
A day ago, two days, three days ago.

Butler (1993, p. 3) writes that the assumption of gendered subjectivity “requires an identification with the normative phantasm of ‘sex,’ and this identification takes place

through a repudiation which produces a domain of abjection". This "normative phantasm" produces a binary that strictly delineates women as either, in Adrienne Rich's (1986, p. 34) words, good, fertile and pure, or evil, barren, and impure. This binary creates one legitimate subject position, one ego-ideal that a woman must emulate, or be branded non-woman and cast into Butler's "domain of abjection". After her pregnancy loss, Plath's second voice is unable to identify with an ideal feminine subject position and describes herself "as a shadow, neither man nor woman". In this line, Plath completely distances her from her femininity. She has lost her sense of self as identified with an ego-ideal, and with this loss she cannot effect a disidentification with the barrenness, coldness and deadliness of the figure of the abject woman.

The other four poems discussed here similarly reflect the loss of this ego-ideal and subsequent identification with abjection. In "Stillborn" Wright refers to the "dark birth" of a stillborn baby as one that "ends in double loss". The doubleness of this loss suggests not only the loss of a pre-term baby's life but also the loss of the pregnant body, the fertile and nurturing state that such a body implies and the loss of confidence in the femininity of the female body, and what that body ought to be able to accomplish: the successful delivery of a live and healthy child. In referring to a double loss, Wright distances women who have experienced pregnancy loss from the perception of the self as fertile and nurturing, and she underscores this distance at a grammatical level when she refers to these women as "those" at the beginning of the poems first and second stanzas and "such women" in the third. Wright's use of the

determiner “such” and the determining pronoun “those” isolates these women as other, and from the world of ‘normal’ women.

Like Plath, Wright figures this distance in terms of polar extremities, referring to the chill of stillborn babies and to “the arctic anti-god,/ the secret of the cold.” The binaries operating here, between warmth and coldness, fertility and barrenness, exemplify Rich’s invocation of the delineation of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ woman. This line also recalls for me Persephone’s descent into Hades’ realm, the anti-god’s realm, a dark and barren world at the furthest remove from the fecundity of her mother Demeter’s world. Like Persephone, these women ‘know’ the anti-god and his cold, dead kingdom. The poem, however, elicits too a comparison between “those” women and Demeter herself.:

they still reach hands across
to grave from flowering earth,
to shroud from living dress.

Like Demeter, these women reach for their lost children and perhaps see themselves as bringers of famine, barrenness and death to the world. Both the figures of Persephone and Demeter invoke the binary that operates to normalise the figure of the fertile and life giving mother and abject the barren and death-bearing woman. In the poem, those who have suffered stillbirth find themselves cast outside the warmth and abundance of a temperate world and outside an ideal femininity, instead identifying with its cold, bleak and infertile extremities and abjection.

Clifton too, reflects this binary in “The Lost Baby Poem”. Like Plath and Wright she uses references to the cold and ice, but in this poem these metaphors do not signify the barrenness of the speaker’s body, but this mother’s inability to provide a life of comfort, protection and warmth for her child:

you would have been born into winter
in the year of the disconnected gas
and no car . . .

As discussed earlier, these lines invoke the social conditions that make, in some circumstances, abortion the only choice a woman feels that she can make. What underlies this, however, is the implication that if a woman cannot provide adequate comfort and protection for her child, she has no right to motherhood. This implication becomes apparent in the final stanza of the poem:

if i am ever less than a mountain
for your definite brothers and sisters
let the rivers pour over my head
let the sea take me for a spiller
of seas let black men call me stranger
always for your never named sake

Here the speaker suggests that a proper enactment of motherhood entails being a ‘mountain’; solid, strong, protecting. It implies abundance and fertility in direct contrast to the cold and barren landscape into which the speaker’s lost baby would have been born.

Like Wright, Clifton also implicitly suggests a sense of the “double loss” that a pregnancy loss may generate. In the poem’s first stanza she conflates the loss of her unborn child with her own fate in the aftermath of that loss:

what did i know about waters rushing back

what did i know about drowning
or being drowned

After dropping her baby into sewage waters, the narrator feels herself figuratively drowned by the after effects of the loss of her baby. Tide-like, the waters rush back to engulf the narrator as they have done her baby. The speaker's engulfment suggests a continued engagement with the loss of her pregnancy and, therefore, Freud's pathological failure to resolve that loss. However, in having the same waters swallow up both, Clifton implies Wright's "double loss", inferring that, in some part, the speaker's life has been lost along with her pregnancy. The similarity between the fate of both mother and child becomes even more apparent in the poem's final stanza, with the speaker's imperative "let black men call me stranger/ always for your never named sake". A stranger is one who is alien, whose name, like the speaker's unborn child, is unknown. The baby has been denied life and unless the speaker atones for her pregnancy loss, she feels that she too must be alienated from and denied the life of her community and her identity within it. Rich (1977/1986, p. 75) reports that "the black nationalist movement has declared that birth control and abortion are 'genocidal' and that black women should feel guilty if they do *not* provide children to carry on the black struggle for survival". Whether due to spontaneous or induced abortion, then, this loss extends beyond the loss of a child to include a loss of identity and abjection within the speaker's specific cultural community.

Sexton's "The Abortion" alludes too, to an upheaval in identity and self-regard following a pregnancy loss. Sexton obscurely prefigures this change in the poem's first stanza in the line "I changed my shoes, and then drove south". The speaker's

change of shoes indicates that she is casting off a self that is associated with the sense of the fertility of the budding earth with which Sexton begins the stanza: “Just as the earth puckered its mouth,/ each bud puffing out from its knot”. These lines align the blossoming of flowers with the release and fertilisation of ova, but the speaker drives away, distancing herself from this fertile landscape. Sexton further alienates the speaker from this fertility in the second and third stanzas when she compares the passing landscape to the roads the speaker actually travels:

Up past the Blue Mountains, where
Pennsylvania humps on endlessly,
wearing, like a crayoned cat, its green hair,

its roads sunken in like a gray washboard;
where, in truth, the ground cracks evilly,
a dark socket from which the coal has poured,

The second stanza invokes a green and fruitful landscape that undulates like the body of a sleeping cat; quiet and serene but full with the promise of the animation and playfulness of cats. However, as Sexton’s use of the word ‘crayoned’ implies, this landscape is a caricature, an imitation that the speaker cannot emulate. Far from the greenness and fecundity depicted in the first two stanzas, the road the speaker travels is grey, cracked, barren, dry and lifeless. Sexton substitutes a hollowed-out landscape that has been sacked of the richness of organic matter. This dark socket, devoid of coal, connotes the womb and the abortion that the speaker will undergo, a bleeding of not only organic ‘waste’, but of “the fullness that love began”, the richness and completeness of pregnancy and motherhood.

Following her abortion, the speaker finds herself incomplete and empty, a partial self that has been robbed of the wholeness that her pregnancy engendered. The poem's sixth stanza reads:

Returning north, even the sky grew thin
like a high window looking nowhere.
The road was as flat as a sheet of tin

Here, Sexton employs the metaphors of the window, flatness and thinness to connote the lifelessness and emptiness within, in terms of both the speaker's no longer pregnant body and her 'road', a journey without the prospect of motherhood and hence devoid of the notion of the self as life-giving and nurturing. Instead, she identifies with abjection, seeing herself, like a sheet of tin, as cold, lifeless and two-dimensional and as a "dark socket" pouring 'organic waste'. This emptiness within recalls Freud's (1917/1984, p. 254) assertion that "in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; *in melancholia it is the ego itself* [italics added]. In this poem, however, the speaker's words may be taken to suggest not a melancholic condition, but a loss in the ego, a loss of a feminine identificatory ideal.

Brooks' "The Mother" marks a departure from the other four poems discussed here in that it does not foreground the association between femininity, and more particularly motherhood, and nature. Nevertheless, the speaker of the poem remains circumscribed by motherhood. Johnson (1986, p. 34) argues that the speaker's apostrophe to her aborted children is an "attempt to absolve herself of guilt" by keeping them alive. The title of the poem seems to support the argument that these children 'live'. The speaker is a mother in the sense that her children 'live' in her

psyche and make demands on her intellectual and emotional energy as any children would. However, one should not forget that in the poem's first line the speaker attributes her inability to forget to abortions. It is thus abortions that, paradoxically, keep these children alive and make the speaker a mother. But this mother will never 'mother' her children. She "will never wind up the sucking thumb/ Or scuttle off ghosts that come". Instead, her mothering consists of those biological and physical aspects of new motherhood: "I have contracted. I have eased/ My dim dears at the breasts they could never suck". In these lines, Brooks uses symbols of new life and motherhood, contractions and breast feeding, but connects these symbols to death; to the theft of her children's lives and the poisoning of their breaths. Jeffner Allen (1984, p. 321) writes that a discursive focus on fragments of the female body, on the reproductive and biologically nurturing aspects of that body, marks it "with a significance that is presumed to be intrinsic, eternal and to characterize the whole of the female body". That is, that a woman's biological capacities to give birth and to nurture the new-born inscribe her entire body and being as one that, naturally must mother. In this poem, Brooks inscribes her narrator within traditional markings of the life-bearing and nurturing mother, however she perverts this association between the mother's body as life-giving, instead characterising this mother as an abject bearer and nurturer of the dead in her references to contractions and breast-feeding.

In each poem discussed here, the five poets make manifest the loss of identity and self that pregnancy loss engenders. Freud would argue that this loss in, and impoverishment of, the ego point to a melancholic pathology, but as

Eng (2000, p. 1278) notes “he makes no social distinctions between the various lost objects engendering melancholia”. Here, Eng points out that Freud’s formulation of melancholia fails to take into account the varying societal and cultural significance that any loss may, or may not, engender. The five poems discussed here exemplify the problems inherent in divorcing loss from its social context. In each poem, women who have experienced miscarriage, stillbirth or abortion are unable to lay claim to that maternal, fertile and nurturing identity that, in Butler’s (2004, p. 27) words, discourse has decreed an instinctual and organic necessity for the attainment of a legitimate feminine subject position. Pregnancy loss results in not only the loss of a child, but also in the loss of an identification with a discursively produced ‘proper’ enactment of femininity. The loss of this subject position entails the recognition that one has fallen short of a feminine ego-ideal and casts these women into an abject otherness.

VII

Conclusion

In commenting on Freud's (1932/1991, p. 162) assertion that "the feminine situation", or rather the acquisition of a feminine identity, is predicated upon a woman's childhood wish for and subsequent adult attainment of motherhood, Zucker (1999, n.p.) observes that his theory leaves "no room . . . for women who choose not to, or are unable to bear children, except as examples of pathology. Freud's prescription of motherhood as the only path to "true womanhood" (Zucker, 1999, n.p.) reflects a broader cultural "resorption of femininity within the Maternal" (Kristeva, 1977/1989, p. 163). In the face of the pervasive ideology that women must mother, the woman who experiences miscarriage, stillbirth or abortion, finds herself unable to assume the subject position 'mother' and, therefore, cannot fulfil the demands of an ego-ideal that has been constructed around the correlation and identification of femininity with maternity.

As the five poems discussed here demonstrate, the loss of an identification with this ideal following a pregnancy loss, assaults a woman's gendered sense of self, calling into question her very femininity and rendering her an abject being. This "narcissistic blow" does indeed, as Freud (1917/1984, p. 262) suggests, "produce the picture of melancholia", manifesting as guilt, self-reproach and an extreme loss of self-regard and self-conception. But to define these effects as signs of pathology ignores the

silence and insinuation of maternal blame that greet pregnancy loss and ignores the meaning and importance that western cultures invest in motherhood.

A pregnancy loss exemplifies what Eng and Kazanjian (2003, p. 5) have called the multifaceted qualities of loss, its significance beyond the individual's loss of a loved object. The poems, in turn, reflect this multiplicity. Their "avowals of and attachments to loss . . . produce a world of remains as a world of new representations and alternative meanings" (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003, p. 5), they open up Freud's stringently defined version of melancholia, allowing a re-reading of the symptoms of melancholia as a response to the discursive production of pregnancy loss and motherhood itself.

A final word. In the face of a pervasive silence, perhaps of even more importance than the poets' engagement with the polysemy of pregnancy loss, is the voice that they give to such losses; a voice that speaks for every woman, including myself, who has grieved a pregnancy loss, and found themselves consigned to Gillett's (1998, n.p.) "horrific silence of the flesh" and near-suffocated by a loss that could not be spoken.

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Appendix of Poems.

Three Women

A Poem for Three Voices

Setting: A Maternity Ward and round about

FIRST VOICE:

I am slow as the world. I am very patient,
Turning through my time, the suns and stars
Regarding me with attention.
The moon's concern is more personal:
She passes and repasses, luminous as a nurse.
Is she sorry for what will happen? I do not think so.
She is simply astonished at fertility.

When I walk out, I am a great event.
I do not have to think, or even rehearse.
What happens in me will happen without attention.
The pheasant stands on the hill;
He is arranging his brown feathers.
I cannot help smiling at what it is I know.
Leaves and petals attend me. I am ready.

SECOND VOICE:

When I first saw it, the small red seep, I did not believe it.
I watched the men walk about me in the office. They were so flat!
There was something about them like cardboard, and now I had caught it,
That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions,
Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed,
Endlessly proceed--and the cold angels, the abstractions.
I sat at my desk in my stockings, my high heels,

And the man I work for laughed: 'Have you seen something awful?
You are so white, suddenly.' And I said nothing.
I saw death in the bare trees, a deprivation.
I could not believe it. Is it so difficult
For the spirit to conceive a face, a mouth?
The letters proceed from these black keys, and these black keys proceed
From my alphabetical fingers, ordering parts,

Parts, bits, cogs, the shining multiples.
I am dying as I sit. I lose a dimension.
Trains roar in my ears, departures, departures!
The silver track of time empties into the distance,

The white sky empties of its promise, like a cup.
These are my feet, these mechanical echoes.
Tap, tap, tap, steel pegs. I am found wanting.

This is a disease I carry home, this is a death.
Again, this is a death. Is it the air,
The particles of destruction I suck up? Am I a pulse
That wanes and wanes, facing the cold angel?
Is this my lover then? This death, this death?
As a child I loved a lichen-bitten name.
Is this the one sin then, this old dead love of death?

THIRD VOICE:

I remember the minute when I knew for sure.
The willows were chilling,
The face in the pool was beautiful, but not mine--
It had a consequential look, like everything else,
And all I could see was dangers: doves and words,
Stars and showers of gold--conceptions, conceptions!
I remember a white, cold wing

And the great swan, with its terrible look,
Coming at me, like a castle, from the top of the river.
There is a snake in swans.
He glided by; his eye had a black meaning.
I saw the world in it--small, mean and black,
Every little word hooked to every little word, and act to act.
A hot blue day had budded into something.

I wasn't ready. The white clouds rearing
Aside were dragging me in four directions.
I wasn't ready.
I had no reverence.
I thought I could deny the consequence--
But it was too late for that. It was too late, and the face
Went on shaping itself with love, as if I was ready.

SECOND VOICE:

It is a world of snow now. I am not at home.
How white these sheets are. The faces have no features.
They are bald and impossible, like the faces of my children,
Those little sick ones that elude my arms.
Other children do not touch me: they are terrible.
They have too many colors, too much life. They are not quiet,
Quiet, like the little emptinesses I carry.

I have had my chances. I have tried and tried.
I have stitched life into me like a rare organ,
And walked carefully, precariously, like something rare.
I have tried not to think too hard. I have tried to be natural.
I have tried to be blind in love, like other women,
Blind in my bed, with my dear blind sweet one,
Not looking, through the thick dark, for the face of another.

I did not look. But still the face was there,
The face of the unborn one that loved its perfections,
The face of the dead one that could only be perfect
In its easy peace, could only keep holy so.
And then there were other faces. The faces of nations,
Governments, parliaments, societies,
The faceless faces of important men.

It is these men I mind:
They are so jealous of anything that is not flat! They are jealous gods
That would have the whole world flat because they are.
I see the Father conversing with the Son.
Such flatness cannot but be holy.
'Let us make a heaven,' they say.
'Let us flatten and launder the grossness from these souls.'

FIRST VOICE:

I am calm. I am calm. It is the calm before something awful:
The yellow minute before the wind walks, when the leaves
Turn up their hands, their pallors. It is so quiet here.
The sheets, the faces, are white and stopped, like clocks.
Voices stand back and flatten. Their visible hieroglyphs
Flatten to parchment screens to keep the wind off.
They paint such secrets in Arabic, Chinese!

I am dumb and brown. I am a seed about to break.
The brownness is my dead self, and it is sullen:
It does not wish to be more, or different.
Dusk hoods me in blue now, like a Mary.
O color of distance and forgetfulness!--
When will it be, the second when Time breaks
And eternity engulfs it, and I drown utterly?

I talk to myself, myself only, set apart--
Swabbed and lurid with disinfectants, sacrificial.
Waiting lies heavy on my lids. It lies like sleep,
Like a big sea. Far off, far off, I feel the first wave tug
Its cargo of agony toward me, inescapable, tidal.

And I, a shell, echoing on this white beach
Face the voices that overwhelm, the terrible element.

THIRD VOICE:

I am a mountain now, among mountainy women.
The doctors move among us as if our bigness
Frightened the mind. They smile like fools.
They are to blame for what I am, and they know it.
They hug their flatness like a kind of health.
And what if they found themselves surprised, as I did?
They would go mad with it.

And what if two lives leaked between my thighs?
I have seen the white clean chamber with its instruments.
It is a place of shrieks. It is not happy.
'This is where you will come when you are ready.'
The night lights are flat red moons. They are dull with blood.
I am not ready for anything to happen.
I should have murdered this, that murders me.

FIRST VOICE:

There is no miracle more cruel than this.
I am dragged by the horses, the iron hooves.
I last. I last it out. I accomplish a work.
Dark tunnel, through which hurtle the visitations,
The visitations, the manifestations, the startled faces.
I am the center of an atrocity.
What pains, what sorrows must I be mothering?

Can such innocence kill and kill? It milks my life.
The trees wither in the street. The rain is corrosive.
I taste it on my tongue, and the workable horrors,
The horrors that stand and idle, the slighted godmothers
With their hearts that tick and tick, with their satchels of instruments.
I shall be a wall and a roof, protecting.
I shall be a sky and a hill of good: O let me be!

A power is growing on me, an old tenacity.
I am breaking apart like the world. There is this blackness,
This ram of blackness. I fold my hands on a mountain.
The air is thick. It is thick with this working.
I am used. I am drummed into use.
My eyes are squeezed by this blackness.
I see nothing.

SECOND VOICE:

I am accused. I dream of massacres.
I am a garden of black and red agonies. I drink them,
Hating myself, hating and fearing. And now the world conceives
Its end and runs toward it, arms held out in love.
It is a love of death that sickens everything.
A dead sun stains the newsprint. It is red.
I lose life after life. The dark earth drinks them.

She is the vampire of us all. So she supports us,
Fattens us, is kind. Her mouth is red.
I know her. I know her intimately--
Old winter-face, old barren one, old time bomb.
Men have used her meanly. She will eat them.
Eat them, eat them, eat them in the end.
The sun is down. I die. I make a death.

FIRST VOICE:

Who is he, this blue, furious boy,
Shiny and strange, as if he had hurtled from a star?
He is looking so angrily!
He flew into the room, a shriek at his heel.
The blue color pales. He is human after all.
A red lotus opens in its bowl of blood;
They are stitching me up with silk, as if I were a material.

What did my fingers do before they held him?
What did my heart do, with its love?
I have never seen a thing so clear.
His lids are like the lilac-flower
And soft as a moth, his breath.
I shall not let go.
There is no guile or warp in him. May he keep so.

SECOND VOICE:

There is the moon in the high window. It is over.
How winter fills my soul! And that chalk light
Laying its scales on the windows, the windows of empty offices,
Empty schoolrooms, empty churches. O so much emptiness!
There is this cessation. This terrible cessation of everything.
These bodies mounded around me now, these polar sleepers--
What blue, moony ray ices their dreams?

I feel it enter me, cold, alien, like an instrument.
And that mad, hard face at the end of it, that O-mouth
Open in its gape of perpetual grieving.
It is she that drags the blood-black sea around

Month after month, with its voices of failure.
I am helpless as the sea at the end of her string.
I am restless. Restless and useless. I, too, create corpses.

I shall move north. I shall move into a long blackness.
I see myself as a shadow, neither man nor woman,
Neither a woman, happy to be like a man, nor a man
Blunt and flat enough to feel no lack. I feel a lack.
I hold my fingers up, ten white pickets.
See, the darkness is leaking from the cracks.
I cannot contain it. I cannot contain my life.

I shall be a heroine of the peripheral.
I shall not be accused by isolate buttons,
Holes in the heels of socks, the white mute faces
Of unanswered letters, confined in a letter case.
I shall not be accused, I shall not be accused.
The clock shall not find me wanting, nor these stars
That rivet in place abyss after abyss.

THIRD VOICE:

I see her in my sleep, my red, terrible girl.
She is crying through the glass that separates us.
She is crying, and she is furious.
Her cries are hooks that catch and grate like cats.
It is by these hooks she climbs to my notice.
She is crying at the dark, or at the stars
That at such a distance from us shine and whirl.

I think her little head is carved in wood,
A red, hard wood, eyes shut and mouth wide open.
And from the open mouth issue sharp cries
Scratching at my sleep like arrows,
Scratching at my sleep, and entering my side.
My daughter has no teeth. Her mouth is wide.
It utters such dark sounds it cannot be good.

FIRST VOICE:

What is it that flings these innocent souls at us?
Look, they are so exhausted, they are all flat out
In their canvas-sided cots, names tied to their wrists,
The little silver trophies they've come so far for.
There are some with thick black hair, there are some bald.
Their skin tints are pink or sallow, brown or red;
They are beginning to remember their differences.

I think they are made of water; they have no expression.
Their features are sleeping, like light on quiet water.
They are the real monks and nuns in their identical garments.
I see them showering like stars on to the world--
On India, Africa, America, these miraculous ones,
These pure, small images. They smell of milk.
Their footsoles are untouched. They are walkers of air.

Can nothingness be so prodigal?
Here is my son.
His wide eye is that general, flat blue.
He is turning to me like a little, blind, bright plant.
One cry. It is the hook I hang on.
And I am a river of milk.
I am a warm hill.

SECOND VOICE:

I am not ugly. I am even beautiful.
The mirror gives back a woman without deformity.
The nurses give back my clothes, and an identity.
It is usual, they say, for such a thing to happen.
It is usual in my life, and the lives of others.
I am one in five, something like that. I am not hopeless.
I am beautiful as a statistic. Here is my lipstick.

I draw on the old mouth.
The red mouth I put by with my identity
A day ago, two days, three days ago. It was a Friday.
I do not even need a holiday; I can go to work today.
I can love my husband, who will understand.
Who will love me through the blur of my deformity
As if I had lost an eye, a leg, a tongue.

And so I stand, a little sightless. So I walk
Away on wheels, instead of legs, they serve as well.
And learn to speak with fingers, not a tongue.
The body is resourceful.
The body of a starfish can grow back its arms
And newts are prodigal in legs. And may I be
As prodigal in what lacks me.

THIRD VOICE:

She is a small island, asleep and peaceful,
And I am a white ship hooting: Goodbye, goodbye.
The day is blazing. It is very mournful.
The flowers in this room are red and tropical.

They have lived behind glass all their lives, they have been cared for
tenderly.

Now they face a winter of white sheets, white faces.

There is very little to go into my suitcase.

There are the clothes of a fat woman I do not know.

There is my comb and brush. There is an emptiness.

I am so vulnerable suddenly.

I am a wound walking out of hospital.

I am a wound that they are letting go.

I leave my health behind. I leave someone

Who would adhere to me: I undo her fingers like bandages: I go.

SECOND VOICE:

I am myself again. There are no loose ends.

I am bled white as wax, I have no attachments.

I am flat and virginal, which means nothing has happened,

Nothing that cannot be erased, ripped up and scrapped, begun again.

These little black twigs do not think to bud,

Nor do these dry, dry gutters dream of rain.

This woman who meets me in windows--she is neat.

So neat she is transparent, like a spirit.

How shyly she superimposes her neat self

On the inferno of African oranges, the heel-hung pigs.

She is deferring to reality.

It is I. It is I--

Tasting the bitterness between my teeth.

The incalculable malice of the everyday.

FIRST VOICE:

How long can I be a wall, keeping the wind off?

How long can I be

Gentling the sun with the shade of my hand,

Intercepting the blue bolts of a cold moon?

The voices of loneliness, the voices of sorrow

Lap at my back ineluctably.

How shall it soften them, this little lullaby?

How long can I be a wall around my green property?

How long can my hands

Be a bandage to his hurt, and my words

Bright birds in the sky, consoling, consoling?

It is a terrible thing

To be so open: it is as if my heart

Put on a face and walked into the world.

THIRD VOICE:

Today the colleges are drunk with spring.
My black gown is a little funeral:
It shows I am serious.
The books I carry wedge into my side.
I had an old wound once, but it is healing.
I had a dream of an island, red with cries.
It was a dream, and did not mean a thing.

FIRST VOICE:

Dawn flowers in the great elm outside the house.
The swifts are back. They are shrieking like paper rockets.
I hear the sound of the hours
Widen and die in the hedgerows. I hear the moo of cows.
The colors replenish themselves, and the wet
Thatch smokes in the sun.
The narcissi open white faces in the orchard.

I am reassured. I am reassured.
These are the clear bright colors of the nursery,
The talking ducks, the happy lambs.
I am simple again. I believe in miracles.
I do not believe in those terrible children
Who injure my sleep with their white eyes, their fingerless hands.
They are not mine. They do not belong to me.

I shall meditate upon normality.
I shall meditate upon my little son.
He does not walk. He does not speak a word.
He is still swaddled in white bands.
But he is pink and perfect. He smiles so frequently.
I have papered his room with big roses,
I have painted little hearts on everything.

I do not will him to be exceptional.
It is the exception that interests the devil.
It is the exception that climbs the sorrowful hill
Or sits in the desert and hurts his mother's heart.
I will him to be common,
To love me as I love him,
And to marry what he wants and where he will.

THIRD VOICE:

Hot noon in the meadows. The buttercups
Swelter and melt, and the lovers

Pass by, pass by.
They are black and flat as shadows.
It is so beautiful to have no attachments!
I am solitary as grass. What is it I miss?
Shall I ever find it, whatever it is?

The swans are gone. Still the river
Remembers how white they were.
It strives after them with its lights.
It finds their shapes in a cloud.
What is that bird that cries
With such sorrow in its voice?
I am young as ever, it says. What is it I miss?

SECOND VOICE:

I am at home in the lamplight. The evenings are lengthening.
I am mending a silk slip: my husband is reading.
How beautifully the light includes these things.
There is a kind of smoke in the spring air,
A smoke that takes the parks, the little statues
With pinkness, as if a tenderness awoke,
A tenderness that did not tire, something healing.

I wait and ache. I think I have been healing.
There is a great deal else to do. My hands
Can stitch lace neatly on to this material. My husband
Can turn and turn the pages of a book.
And so we are at home together, after hours.
It is only time that weighs upon our hands.
It is only time, and that is not material.

The streets may turn to paper suddenly, but I recover
From the long fall, and find myself in bed,
Safe on the mattress, hands braced, as for a fall.
I find myself again. I am no shadow
Though there is a shadow starting from my feet. I am a wife.
The city waits and aches. The little grasses
Crack through stone, and they are green with life.

Sylvia Plath

Stillborn

Those who have once admitted
within their pulse and blood
the chill of that most loving
that most despairing child
known what is never told -
the arctic anti-god,
the secret of the cold.

Those who have once expected
the pains of that dark birth
which takes but without giving
and ends in double loss -
they still reach hands across
to grave from flowering earth,
to shroud from living dress.

Alive, they should be dead
who cheated their own death,
and I have heard them cry
when all else was lying still
'O that I stand above
While you lie down beneath!'
Such women weep for love
of one who drew no breath
and in the night they lie
giving the breast to death.

Judith Wright

The Lost Baby Poem

the time i dropped your almost body down
down to meet the waters under the city
and run one with the sewage to the sea
what did i know about waters rushing back
what did i know about drowning
or being drowned

you would have been born into winter
in the year of the disconnected gas
and no car we would have made the thin
walk over Genessee hill into the Canada wind
to watch you slip like ice into strangers' hands
you would have fallen naked as snow into winter
if you were here i could tell you these
and some other things

if i am ever less than a mountain
for your definite brothers and sisters
let the rivers pour over my head
let the sea take me for a spiller
of seas let black men call me stranger
always for your never named sake

Lucille Clifton

The Mother

Abortions will not let you forget.
You remember the children you got that you did not get,
The damp small pulps with a little or with no hair,
The singers and workers that never handled the air.
You will never neglect or beat
Them, or silence or buy with a sweet.
You will never wind up the sucking-thumb
Or scuttle off ghosts that come.
You will never leave them, controlling your luscious sigh,
Return for a snack of them, with gobbling mother-eye.

I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my dim killed
children.

I have contracted. I have eased
My dim dears at the breasts they could never suck.
I have said, Sweets, if I sinned, if I seized
Your luck
And your lives from your unfinished reach,
If I stole your births and your names,
Your straight baby tears and your games,
Your stilted or lovely loves, your tumults, your marriages, aches,
and your deaths,
If I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths,
Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate.
Though why should I whine,
Whine that the crime was other than mine?--
Since anyhow you are dead.
Or rather, or instead,
You were never made.
But that too, I am afraid,
Is faulty: oh, what shall I say, how is the truth to be said?
You were born, you had body, you died.
It is just that you never giggled or planned or cried.

Believe me, I loved you all.
Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved you
All.

Gwendolyn Brooks

The Abortion

*Somebody who should have been born
is gone.*

Just as the earth puckered its mouth,
each bud puffing out from its knot,
I changed my shoes, and then drove south.

Up past the Blue Mountains, where
Pennsylvania humps on endlessly,
wearing, like a crayoned cat, its green hair,

its roads sunken in like a gray washboard;
where, in truth, the ground cracks evilly,
a dark socket from which the coal has poured,

*Somebody who should have been born
is gone.*

the grass as bristly and stout as chives,
and me wondering when the ground would break,
and me wondering how anything fragile survives;

up in Pennsylvania, I met a little man,
not Rumpelstiltskin, at all, at all . . .
he took the fullness that love began.

Returning north, even the sky grew thin
like a high window looking nowhere.
The road was as flat as a sheet of tin.

*Somebody who should have been born
is gone.*

Yes, woman, such logic will lead
to loss without death. Or say what you meant,
you coward...this baby that I bleed.

Anne Sexton